

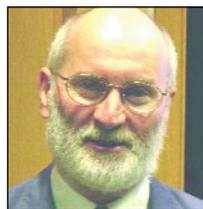
# The trouble with ‘doing boy’

**T**HE difference between boys and girls or men and women fascinates the public and the academic community alike, and there is a vast amount of theoretically driven and empirically based research on gender (e.g. Archer & Lloyd, 2002). In contrast, an alternative approach popular in British psychology is feminist-based social constructionism. I will provide a critical analysis of this approach, using as an example an article published in *The Psychologist* at the beginning of 2003, ‘The trouble with boys’ (Frosh *et al.*, 2003).

This particular article described current manifestations of masculinity in teenage boys, emphasising its frequently remarked-on problematic nature, particularly among the young, underrestrained and undereducated. Using accounts derived from 45 group interviews with teenage boys, Frosh and his colleagues described a number of themes, such as toughness and avoidance of femininity, with its associated homophobia. However, the type of research portrayed in the article, and its theoretical underpinnings, raises a number of fundamental issues about the strategies psychologists use to research this and other areas of human behaviour.

## **The trouble with feminist-based social constructionism**

Feminist-based social constructionism, the perspective used in the article, has a number of overt and covert features. Overt ones include unnecessary neologisms, such as *hegemonic masculinity*, and odd phrases, such as *doing boy*. Scare-quotes encase everyday words, so we have ‘control’, ‘crisis’, ‘macho’, ‘soft’, ‘race’, and even ‘findings’. These may be seen as harmless stylistic oddities that at worst risk an entry in Pseuds Corner. Of more concern are the covert features of the approach: the assumption that masculinity can be understood solely in terms of its social construction, the replacement of empirical evidence with qualitative accounts, and the



**JOHN ARCHER** argues that social constructionist research favours politically biased interpretations of discursive material, at the expense of a large body of empirical evidence.

interpretation of accounts according to a particular political agenda about masculinity. These include the view that masculinity is necessarily problematic, that it exists only in relation to femininity, and that it is socially constructed. Although not explicitly stated in the article, these features represent an extension of feminist theory to masculinity.

I would argue that authors who adopt the feminist-based social constructionism approach tend to neglect the enormous and diverse empirically based literature on masculinity. The central features of masculine role norms, and of hypermasculine values, have been researched for the last 20 years, revealing again and again the themes noted in the accounts under described by Frosh and his colleagues (McCreary *et al.*, 1998; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Thompson & Pleck, 1986). And I don’t believe that this research is ignored because of lack of space: I believe it is nothing less than the rejection and devaluing of the scientific method, in favour of politically acceptable interpretations of discursive material.

Discussion of gender also needs context. A fundamental question often raised in discussions of masculinity concerns the forms it takes, and why it is a frequent problem not only in contemporary Western society, but also in most societies for which there is documentary evidence. Any answer to the question of why boys are troublesome should therefore contain reference to anthropological research, evolutionary analyses, as well as basic processes from developmental and social psychology. Frosh and his colleagues gave an account

of contemporary young masculinity that lacked this context – evolutionary, historical, cultural and developmental.

The remainder of my article elaborates some of these shortcomings, first, by outlining the limitations of relying only on qualitative data, especially when combined

with a narrow interpretative framework. This is followed by an overview of some of the richer evidence-based and theoretical approaches that can be brought to the study of masculinity once one is free from the methodological and theoretical shackles of narrow social constructionism.

### **Qualitative data is not enough**

I have no objections to the use of qualitative methods *per se*, only to a particular belief that has grown up around their use – that they can somehow replace quantitative research. Many important discoveries in psychology have involved the initial use of qualitative accounts. Niko Tinbergen, the founder of modern ethology, emphasised the importance of beginning any new topic of investigation with a discursive or natural history phase (Tinbergen, 1963), and Burt and Oaksford (1999) made a similar point in relation to the current use of qualitative methods in British psychology. Qualitative accounts can form a rich source of hypotheses for future more systematic investigations,

particularly when the participants inhabit a social world that is generally not open to the researchers. Thus, the topics of teenage girls' aggression (Owens *et al.*, 2000), young men's behaviour during the night out (Benson & Archer, 2002), and men's and women's cognition about aggression (Campbell & Muncer, 1987) have all been informed by collecting subjective accounts before moving on to systematic investigations.

Qualitative accounts can also provide information on issues raised, but not answered, by quantitative methods. Neither of these ways of using qualitative methods denies the central importance of hypothesis testing for building up a coherent body of findings in relation to theory in a particular area. Research based solely on qualitative accounts cannot do this, and remains at the level of a collection of anecdotes waiting to be transformed into testable hypotheses.

If people want an account of the problematic nature of masculinity that is more discursive than one based on empirical research, there are plenty of

journalistic and literary sources available. In fact, once one adopts social constructionism, any account of the topic under investigation – whether from qualitative research, or from biography, fiction or journalists' writings – can potentially contribute insights into an area of investigation. Thus when Frosh and colleagues wrote that masculinity is viewed as troublesome and ambiguous, they are repeating what was articulated succinctly by the author Garrison Keillor, when he stated: 'Years ago manhood was an opportunity for achievement, and now it is a problem to be overcome' (Keillor, 1993, p.11).

### **Masculinity in a cross-cultural and historical perspective**

If researchers have a single politically inspired view of their topic, their commentaries on qualitative material will be moulded according to this ideological position. For Frosh and colleagues, this involved the view that masculinity 'exists only in relation to femininity' and 'is constructed' (p.85). The rationale for the first assumption would appear to be to legitimise one particular approach to the study of masculinity, as an offshoot of feminist analyses. Yet from the wider perspective of evolutionary psychology and empirical research on gender development, this assumption is questionable. Many aspects of masculinity, such as proneness to risk-taking and escalation of aggressive encounters, can be understood in terms of selection pressures on males that are not present for females (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Trivers, 1972). The social worlds of boys and their development can be viewed independently from those of girls (Archer, 1992; Maccoby, 1998; Pellegrini & Archer, *in press*). In most human cultures boys and girls form same-sex groups, which develop their distinct ways of interacting.

The second assumption, that social construction is the primary process for understanding masculinity, serves to legitimise qualitative accounts as evidence, and to downplay the all-important process of testing hypotheses with empirical findings. By viewing masculinity only in terms of a set of social constructions about how men do what they do, collecting accounts and commenting on them will seem a reasonable way of researching masculinity. But empirically based cross-cultural research on gender roles leads one to question how unfettered social

construction could possibly have led to the consistent regularities that are found. Williams and Best (1990) studied the characteristics associated with men and women in 27 countries in all parts of the world, and found substantial similar attributes in these different cultures. Wood and Eagly (2002) examined 186 societies from the ethnographic record to investigate universality and diversity of gender-related attributes, such as the division of labour, patriarchy and the double standard of sexual fidelity. Their findings, particularly those for the division of labour, provided strong evidence for some universal sex differences, and against the constructionist view that sex differences are solely a product of specific contexts and interactions.

Anthropologists such as Gregor (1985) and Gilmore (1990) have noted common features of masculinity in different cultures, notably that masculinity is more of an acquired status than femininity. Typically, men have to achieve masculinity by courageous actions. These are not confined to militaristic cultures: men in peaceful societies may have to perform difficult or risky tasks to be accepted as a man. Such initiation rituals re-emerge in particular masculine subcultures even when the society as a whole has abandoned them. Contemporary examples include boarding schools, the armed forces and US fraternities. There are a number of other features of masculinity that commonly appear in different traditional cultures, such as the need for men to avoid behaving in feminine ways, the importance of sexual prowess, and the need to dominate women.

The notion of masculine honour is widespread in different cultures. It is based on the principle that a man gains a reputation as someone who demands respect and compliance from others by his reputation for effective violent action (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Insults play a crucial part in societies with the culture of honour, since they imply that the target can be disregarded as someone who cannot defend himself, his possessions and his family. Insults directed at women from a man's family are particularly important, as they imply that he cannot protect his dependants, or they seek to lower his social standing by denigrating his family of origin. Nisbett and Cohen (1996) have linked the culture of honour with herding societies, where men can face the loss of their entire wealth through theft. In the absence of an effective rule of law, the

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principle of developing a reputation for credible retaliation emerges as the only effective way of maintaining the integrity of possessions and family. In such circumstances, 'everyman his own sheriff' (Nisbett, 1998).

It is likely that a reputation for a credible threat of violence assumes importance for gaining status and respect whenever moral restraints and the rule of law are absent. Although this is obscured in modern Western society, it emerges as an important component of masculinity when such constraints are absent, as in modern inner-city streets or prisons, and even in school playgrounds. The history of violence in modern Western Europe shows its gradual decline as the state was able to assume a monopoly of the legitimate use of force (Ruff, 2001). Daly and Wilson (1988) have argued that in pre-state societies a man unable to protect himself physically would be helpless to stop his possessions being taken from him. They also add that it is all too easy to overlook this reality from

the viewpoint of the educated middle class in modern Western nations. Examples from various parts of the world of what happens when the rule of law breaks down are apparent from recent history.

We can conclude that masculinity shows certain consistent features across cultures, particularly an emphasis on toughness and avoiding anything construed as feminine. This links it with the culture of honour, which is pronounced when there is no effective rule of law. All these aspects of masculinity are ones that seem undesirable from a liberal feminist perspective, and are regarded as troublesome when they emerge. However, instead of seeing them as an undesirable set of socially constructed values, they can be more realistically portrayed as evolved adaptations for life in highly competitive social worlds. They represent a form of default value to which human males drift in the absence of inhibiting influences such as the rule of law, a moral code, the company of women and children, and education. The

**WEBLINKS**

- The Frosh *et al.* article: [www.bps.org.uk/publications/thepsychologist/0203frosh.pdf](http://www.bps.org.uk/publications/thepsychologist/0203frosh.pdf)
- University of Central Lancashire aggression group: [www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psycholl/aggress.htm](http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psycholl/aggress.htm)
- Information on Simon Baron-Cohen's work: [www.autismresearchcentre.com/arcl](http://www.autismresearchcentre.com/arcl)
- My essay on gender and warriors: [www.Christinekowalpost.com/amazonText.htm](http://www.Christinekowalpost.com/amazonText.htm)
- International Society for Research on Aggression: [www.israsociety.com](http://www.israsociety.com)

absence of all these, with the additional disinhibiting influence of alcohol, and the routine carrying of guns, can account for the very high homicide rates in US western frontier towns in the 1870s and 1880s (Courtwright, 1996), and to a lesser extent in some North American inner cities today.

### The biological construction of masculinity

The view that gender can be understood solely in terms of social discourse is also inconsistent with a number of findings from biologically oriented studies. Perhaps the most telling is the study in which Alexander and Hines (2002) presented young vervet monkeys with six types of children's toy, including two that were stereotypically masculine (e.g. a police car) and two that were stereotypically feminine (e.g. a doll). The number of approaches made to the toys was not related to the sex of the monkey or the type of toy. However, the subsequent contact time was. Female monkeys spent more time with the stereotypically feminine toys and male monkeys spent more time with the stereotypically masculine toys, paralleling what is found in young humans. Such findings are totally inexplicable from a social constructionist perspective, unless one believes that monkeys engage in discourses that construct a form of

masculinity that coincidentally happens to be that which we observe in human children. Instead, the authors of this particular study speculated that there are early sex-typical perceptual biases, which humans share with a range of primates, in the same way that they share other perceptual characteristics, such as colour vision.

There are also studies showing behavioural sex differences at ages before children are able to form any notions of socially constructed gender. These generally fit a pattern that maps on to later sex differences, such as the female advantage in language-related skills and decoding non-verbal information, and the male advantage in spatial and mechanical abilities (Archer & Lloyd, 2002; Baron-Cohen, 2003; Geary, 1998). Connellan *et*

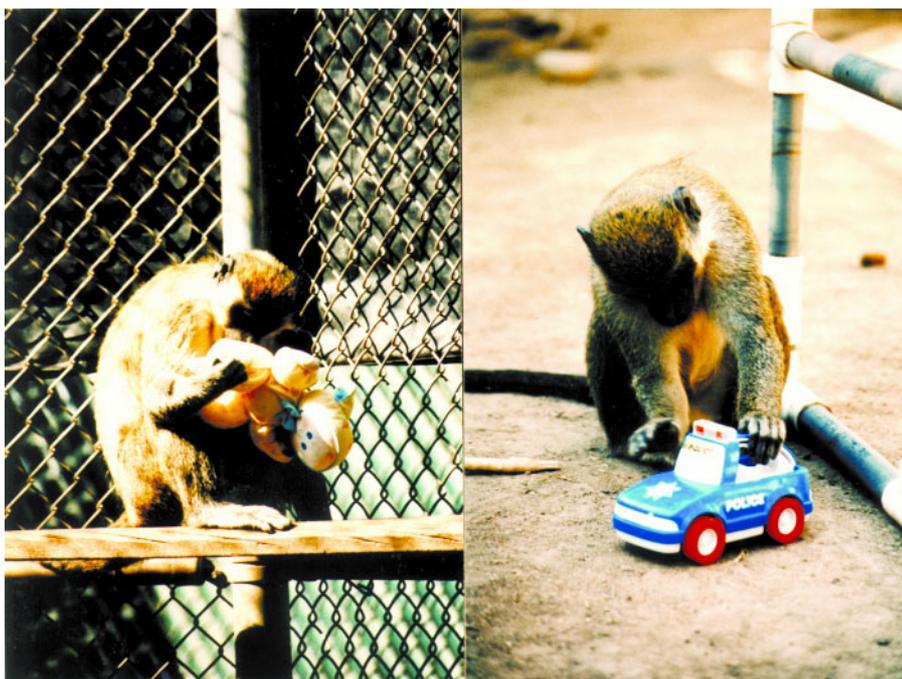
### 'masculinity shows certain consistent features across cultures'

*al.* (2000) presented babies, at an average of 36 hours after birth, with a face or a mobile matched along a number of dimensions, and recorded the infants' eye movements. Males looked at the mobiles for significantly longer than they did the

faces, whereas females looked at the faces for longer than they did the mobiles. The size of these differences was just under half a standard deviation. They indicate that there is already a considerable sex difference in preferences, consistent with those found in adults, long before the traditional socialisation influences could have exerted any influence. Other studies show that boys are more active than girls from the first year of life, and even from before birth (Campbell & Eaton, 1999; Eaton & Enns, 1986). This is consistent with findings that boys prefer more active play than girls do from an early age (e.g. Smith & Daglish, 1977).

One prominent developmental theory of gender that parallels social constructionism in some ways (yet retains an empirical base) is gender schema theory (Martin & Halverson, 1981; Ruble & Martin, 1998). This holds that a child's early gender-typed behaviour and play preferences arise from their ability to categorise themselves and others as male and female. According to this view, early sex differences in behaviour should stem from the presence of early cognitive schemata. These schemata organise incoming information about gender so that children prefer to play with children of their own sex and with toys that are viewed as appropriate for their own sex. Yet it is now clear that sex-typed preferences for toys pre-date the development of these cognitive schemata by a long way, and that the ability to categorise oneself and other children by sex is unrelated to early sex differences in behaviour and preference for gender-stereotypic toys. For example, in a study of 27-month-old children, the ability to label self and other children as male or female was unrelated to early sex differences in social behaviour or to gender-stereotypic toy preferences (Campbell *et al.*, 2002).

These are just a few of the increasing number of studies indicating that there are early biases in the behaviour of boys and girls that are compatible with later gender-typical interests and activities. Other evidence suggests that prenatal hormone levels influence early sex-typical behaviour, such as language development (Finegan *et al.*, 1992; Lutchmaya *et al.*, 2002) and eye contact (Lutchmaya *et al.*, 2003). Hines *et al.* (2002) measured gender-role behaviour at three and a half years in a sample of children whose mothers had had blood levels of testosterone measured during pregnancy.



Female monkeys spent more time with 'female' toys and male monkeys spent more time with 'male' toys. Reprinted from Alexander and Hines (2002) with permission from Elsevier

Girls who showed the most masculine behaviour patterns (in terms of play, activities and toy preferences) had higher levels of maternal testosterone than those who showed the most feminine behaviour patterns. Although the effect size was small, these findings indicate an influence on gender-role behaviour that pre-dates any impact of the cultural representations of gender.

The social constructionist perspective on gender focuses on differences that are inconsistent across contexts and are constructed out of social interactions (Bohan, 1993; Marecek, 1995). It is certainly the case that sex differences in social behaviour are only observed in a social context, but their regularity from early in life to adulthood indicates that they are not constructed anew in each social interaction. Early biases direct boys' and girls' behaviour in different ways, leading them to choose different playmates and activities,

and to develop in culturally different peer groups (Archer, 1992; Maccoby, 1998). Social representations of gender arise from this complex interaction of nature and

### 'Psychologists will not find answers in the never-never land of social constructionism'

nurture, rather than being constructed anew from the gendered discourses at each subsequent stage of development.

### Conclusions

In this brief account, I have shown that there are consistent patterns of masculinity across nations and history that can be understood from an evolutionary perspective, and that behavioural sex differences arise out of biological differences that are apparent early in

development. There is a rich empirical and theory-based research literature that can and should be applied to discussing the problems of boys. Psychologists will not find answers in the never-never land of social constructionism, with its unrealistic assumption that gender is constructed from the relations between people, and the language they use to describe the social world. Such a view can only survive through a denial of empirical evidence, an insistence on regarding anecdotes as evidence, and interpreting these anecdotes in an ideologically motivated way. It is clear from history where such a belief system leads – to the rejection of empirical science in favour of ideologically motivated pseudoscience.

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